

Available online at www.sciencedirect.com**SciVerse ScienceDirect**

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 33 (2012) 333 – 337

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

PSIWORLD 2011

The role of the cognitive behavioral approach in the reduction of the risk of recidivism for the persons under surveillance of the probation service

Doina Stefana Saucan^{a*}, Mihai-Ioan Micle^a, Ana-Maria Marhan^a, Gabriel Oancea^b

^a*Institute of Philosophy and Psychology "Constantin Radulescu Motru", Calea 13 Septembrie nr. 13, Bucharest, 050711, Romania*

^b*Probation Service of the Bucharest Tribunal, Str. Ilfov, nr. 6, sector 5, Bucharest 50045, Romania*

Abstract

The present paper has the following objectives: the description of the main characteristics of the approach to the offenders' rehabilitation, based on structured group programs and the description of the effects that structured group program ("Heads or tails") have in relation to the subjects' resources and their willingness to reconsider their attitudes towards themselves, reality (justice, rules, customs etc.), and their positive behavioral changes. The results showed that subjects who followed this program have revised their perception on the reality, being able to make a cost-benefit analysis with a focus on a socially desirable decision.

© 2012 Published by Elsevier B.V. Selection and/or peer-review under responsibility of PSIWORLD2011

Open access under [CC BY-NC-ND license](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Keywords: cognitive-behavioral program, probation, recidivism, pro-social ways, rehabilitation.

1. Preliminary considerations

The basis of cognitive-behavioral therapy consists of the principle that between cognition and behavior is a strong connection (Sudak, 2006, p. 10). Actually, the cognitive-behavioral therapy supports the subjects to reconfigure their behavior by changing their way of thinking. This therapy encourages the clients to realize their negative thoughts and the beliefs generated by (Curwen, Palmer, & Ruddell, 2000, p.11). The cognitive-behaviorism appears in the rehabilitation of offenders along with the enforcement of "What works" approach in the field of correctional at the end of the 20th century. This new paradigm is

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +4-072-270-6878; fax: +4-021-318-2442.

E-mail address: doina_saucan@yahoo.com

founded on research led by the Canadian psychologist Robert Ross (Kendall, 2008). He made a meta-analysis and the conclusion was that the social reintegration programs which have proven successful in rehabilitating the offenders were the ones which also entailed a component based on the cognitive processes influence criminal behavior. A number of Canadian researchers – Don Andrews, James Bonta, Paul Gendreau and Frank Porporino – developed cognitive-behavioral programs in penitentiaries in order to reduce the risk of recidivism (Mair, 2006, p.15). Furthermore, The Council of Europe Committee of Ministers in their 2000 Recommendation, (22) on improving European rules concerning the communautaires sanctions and penalties refers to the need to extend the cognitive-behavioral approaches in the activity of offenders' rehabilitation. It is a way to give consistence to the rehabilitation as penalty principle (Robinson, 2008; Logan & Gaes, 1993). The most programs are group programs that aim to support the offender to improve their problem solving abilities, in this respect combining a wide range of learning opportunities in a structured manner (Raynor, 2007): "Think first", "One to one", "Aggression replacement training", "Reasoning and Rehabilitation", "Structured Supervision Program" (Durrance, Hosking, Thorburn, 2010).

The "Heads or Tails" Program entered in practice of the Romanian probation System since 2008 when the Ministry of Justice took into account the need of specialized programs accreditation for work with the persons under the surveillance of probation service. It was initially developed in Belgium correctional agencies, being implemented in Romania as a result of cooperation between Romanian Probation Directorate and the NGO Cent. This program aims to decrease the risk of committing / recommitting new crimes by making the offender sensitive to and aware of the psychological, juridical and social consequences that the victims of these crimes undergo. During the formation process, themes such as the following are analyzed: crime (self-consciousness, motives and wishes which have led to crime), citizenship (laws, limits, freedom, justice, as well as the values which it involves), influences (peer pressure, media), stress and emotion (knowing one's emotions, the positive affirmation of one's personality, self-acceptance), victims in general (a more realistic representation, the hidden side of a victimization that the young people have been through as victims), the victim/ the victims of the offender's crime (the emotions, the consequences on different levels and the possibilities of bringing the conflict to an end).

2. Research methodology

2.1. Objectives

To ascertain the contribution *The Heads and Tails Program* made, considering the beneficiaries' resources and potential to reevaluate their attitude towards the people they interact with, towards themselves and the activity they perform, towards reality (justice, rules, customs etc.) by mental reconfigurations and by adopting legitimate behavior.

2.2. Hypothesis

There is a probability that, after following the *Heads and Tails program*, the beneficiaries could become aware of their own limits, could modify their distorted perceptions and could develop their ability to empathize; the beneficiaries could actualize and increase their resources for the modification of cognitive distortions, for the re-designing of the decision processes.

2.3. Methods

The RCED evaluation questionnaire, drawn up by a collective of researchers from the Faculty of Sociology and Social Assistance Bucharest for the project of the Romanian Center for Education and Development, using a 5 point scale, includes dimensions that assess the relevance of each cause considered of risk for recidivism : the offenders' perceptions on the current legal regulations in general and on justice in particular; self-knowledge and self-image; the role of school/education in building social and professional status, the ability to react in situations involving risk; decision-making capacities, the judges' perspective on the way offenders perceive their sentence; the offenders' perception on the way the victim has been affected by the crime; emotions and experiences related to the crime; the offenders' feelings towards the sanction and the victim; the way in which the offenders assume their crime; the offenders' empathy towards the victims; the way in which the offender participant to the program is perceived by the persons that support him before and after the crime; the offenders' image of the way the victim has experienced the crime; the representation of the beneficiaries' objectives for the future. The questionnaire was individually filled in by the beneficiaries both at the beginning and at the end of the program.

The preliminary interview (PI), based on interview, aims to evaluate the degree of the risk of recidivism by the probation advisor at the moment when beneficiaries were put under surveillance. The questionnaire includes the exploration of: the social and family context, education, professional experience, the subjective relation to the penalty, peers etc.

The structured interview, (referring to the way the program is structured, infrastructure, working conditions, the atmosphere for working in group, the perception on the attitude of the mediators, the way in which they perceive and are aware of the benefits of the program etc.) had the objective to offer extra information on the items from the questionnaire and to create a preliminary perception and attitude of the offenders towards the program as a product (a concept integrated and delivered as a method of intervention).

2.4. Place and sample of subjects

The investigation took place between December 2010 and January 2011 in the Probation Service of the Bucharest Tribunal. The research has been carried on eight persons under surveillance, obliged by the court to take part in such program.

3. Results

It was considered necessary to analyze subjects' responses on each dimension and the differences between their responses obtained from RCED questionnaire at the beginning and the end of the program. Also, we observed the correlations between results at RCED questionnaire and those of the preliminary interview in order to determine the risk of recidivism after following the structured program.

We will succinctly present the results focusing on some dimensions of our instruments (RCED and PI).

Dimension *the offenders' perceptions on the current legal regulations in general and on justice in particular* at the beginning of the program (on a scale from 1 - total disagreement - to 5 - total agreement) - 62, 5% of subjects answered desirably (partial agreement) to the items: "the law is the same for everybody"; "society is fairly constituted"; For the same dimension and items, when the program has finished, these subjects showed an increase of the agreement (total agreement); there is a significant correlation between the results to these items and those obtained to the item "I'm guilty, I would give the same penalty" (dimension *Judges' perspective on the way offenders perceive their sentence*), and the item

“I have a feeling of guilt/ shame” (dimension *I have feelings and emotions associated to the crime* - $p < 0,001$).

Dimension *Self-knowledge and self-image* – 87,5% of subjects answered, at the beginning of the program with disagreement at the items “Sometimes I feel I’m no good”; “I tend to believe I’m a loser” ; when program ended, these subjects have chosen “total agreement”, reconsidering their attitude towards themselves.

Dimension *the way in which the offenders think that the victim has experienced the moment / the effects of the crime* – for the items “fear”, “shock”, with one exception (a subject having a high level of education), there is no difference of perception at the beginning and at the end of the program, the offenders being generally insensible to the victims’ suffering.

At the beginning of the program, for the dimension *capacities of resolution*, the subjects are limited to accept idea of “chance and luck” in life while at the end, they decide to use their “intelligence, abilities” to solve life problems.

Dimension *Future plans* – 87, 5% of subjects, evaluated with medium risk of recidivism at the beginning of the program according the preliminary interview, at the end they start to envisage different objectives (getting a job, getting involved in an educational process etc.).

A year after the end of the program, the analysis of the files of the eight subjects shows that a process of rehabilitation can be ascertained: according to the probation advisor's evaluation, the risk of recidivism for all the participants to the program is very low.

4. Discussion

Considering the subjects’ attitudes towards the regulations in general and justice in particular, it can say that there is a change for the better at the end of the program; they became more responsible, aware of their crime, capable to adopt a responsible attitude. The answers at the “sometimes I feel I’m not good” and “I tend to believe I’m a loser” at the beginning of the program can be explained by a negative self-image, low feeling of safety, and low self-esteem but also through the tendency to be permeable to others’ suggestions (their family members who are themselves offenders considering him/her an innocent victim of the circumstances). At the end of the program, after having become aware of their own limits, after having modified their distorted perceptions and reconsidered their attitude towards themselves and the world, they accepted the necessity of redesigning their decision and self-control processes.

The subjects included in the program did not consider their victim like a person who suffered because of their crime, no at its beginning nor at its end, because they have a low level of empathy and because of the misunderstanding of the victim status. Mostly the offenders are convicted for theft and think the victims suffer only when they are physically aggressed.

At the end of program, the subjects developed their abilities to solve the life problems, as a result of attitudinal, mental and social reconfiguration.

The offenders, beneficiaries of the program, state that the objective in this program is to diminish his negative feelings and emotions related to his/her crime, the sanction and to the victim. At the end of the program, after becoming aware of the internal mechanism which led him to crime, one of subjects succeeded to release his negative feelings: “I understood the mechanism which determined my actions at that moment”. He modified his paradigm (the way of perceiving, understanding, and interpreting reality) towards the justice system, towards the way society is organized, towards his own crime and the people that supported him.

The results of this program will be discussed with the judges in order to give them support in establishing obligations and measures in determining the sentence under the surveillance of the probation service.

5. Conclusions

After participating to this program, the offenders have become aware of their limits, have modified their distorted perceptions, and have developed their ability to empathize. The qualitative analysis of the dimensions of the questionnaire RCED, at the beginning and at the end of the program, and of PI underlines the way in which the beneficiaries perceive and understand the emotions and experiences associated to the crime, to the sentence or to the victim, the way in which they assume responsibility for the crime, as well as the differences between their abilities to understand the experience and emotions of the victim (empathy). At the end of these programs, the participants accept the necessity of re-designing their decisional and control processes. At the beginning of the program, the beneficiaries recognized their criminal needs identified also by the probation advisor, and at the end of the program decrease the risk of recidivism from medium to low level.

A good implementation of this program should nonetheless give special attention to the selection of the beneficiaries, so that the inclusion of mentally ill or addicted persons should be avoided. The collaboration with the court is also important, in order to facilitate the dissemination of these programs and to oblige those who have problems related to their decisional and empathic capacities to participate to such programs. Another essential factor is the adequate instruction of the advisors who implement this program. The inclusion of more people is also recommended, in order to confirm the effect this program has on the reconfiguration of behavioral, social and cognitive aspects. We also would recommend a research in order to compare the results of “Heads and Tails” program with those of another cognitive behavioral program. Also, such cognitive behavioral program could be the basis in order to identify / update some dimensions / sub dimensions of personality that would be configured to lower the risk of criminal recidivism.

Our study represents a starting point to develop other programs for offenders in cognitive behavioral perspective which proved, in our opinion, beneficial for the reconfiguration of the attitudes and for redesigning the processes of decision and control.

References

- Curwen, B., Palmer, S., Ruddell, P. (2000). *Brief cognitive behavior therapy*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Durrance, P., Hosking, N., Thorburn, N. (2010). Can structured programmes improve one-to one supervision? In F. McNeil, P.&C. Trotter, *Offender Supervision – New directions in theory, research and practice*, (pp. 193-214). Abingdon: Willan Publishing.
- Kendall, K. (2008). Dangerous thinking: a critical history of correctional cognitive behaviouralism. In G. Mair, *What Matters in Probation* pp. 53-89. Cullompton: Willan Publishing.
- Logan, C.H., Gaes, G.G. (1993). Meta-analysis and the rehabilitation of punishment. *Justice Quarterly*, 245-263.
- Raynor, P. (2007). In R. Canton, D. Hancock, *Dictionary of Probation and Offender Management*. Cullompton: Willan Publishing.
- Robinson, G. (2008). Late-modern rehabilitation: The evolution of a penal strategy. *Punishment and Society*, 10, 429-445.
- Sudak, D.M. (2006). *Cognitive behavioral therapy for clinicians*. Philadelphia: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins.